

Agustina Bessa-Luís

Agustina Bessa-Luís was born in 1922 in the north of Portugal, near Amarante. She was educated and later settled in Oporto. She learned to read very early on, and wrote her first novel when she was eighteen. However, her first great success as a writer was with the novel *A Sibila* (1954). She has subsequently written nearly a hundred other books: novels, stories, children's fiction, plays, biographies, essays, and enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with the celebrated Portuguese film-maker Manoel de Oliveira, who based a number of his films on her work, with her providing the script. She also found time to edit a newspaper for a year, to be director of the Teatro Nacional de Dona Luísa II in Lisbon for three years and was actively involved in many other cultural institutions. Her work has brought her many prizes and awards, including the most prestigious Portuguese literary prize, the Prémio Camões. She stopped writing in 2006 for health reasons.

The stories included in this anthology all come from the collection *Contos impopulares*, which she wrote between 1951 and 1953. Their potency lies in their extraordinary blend of realism and surrealism. Written shortly after the end of the Second World War, they seem to ponder what it is to be human.

On the Road to Emmaus

The man slowed down, reducing the flow of petrol to the small engine, which resembled the blue abdomen of a metallic bee. The buzzing, which was also like that of a frantic, threatening wasp, subsided, gradually decreasing until it was replaced by the crunch of tyres on sand, which the wheels sent spinning up on either side in a light spray. He didn't know the road, and the glaring sun, like an overturned crucible spilling bright, crackling sparks over the landscape, causing horizons to vanish and details to disappear, made him feel still more disoriented. It was a true dog-day afternoon, scorching, baking, thick with the smells erupting from ditches, and from the gravelly mouths of mines in which algae and the carcasses of weasels and field mice lay rotting. The bramble thickets, laden with dusty blackberries, which hung among the coarse leaves like fossils, were disturbed only by a beating wing, a creeping scorpion, the thrum of a cockchafer or a dust-coloured grasshopper springing about among the dried maize stalks. From the threshing-floors came the crackle of parched hay and the spoiled ears of wheat twisting in the heat. A few scrawny dogs were dozing beneath the stacks, using their paws to flick away from their mangy ears the flies picking at their scabs and drawing blood.

The man continued on down the road, inspecting the various properties, the thatched huts, and the orchards, where he came upon a single pink, innocently flamboyant rosebush. As if filtered up through the earth, there came murmurs of a world stirring in the darkness and the hidden depths – the reaching out of roots, the sighing of corollas withering with each expended drop of dew, the whisper of water as it ran beneath a cupola of rocks, the hollow of an enormous tree trunk, a germinating seed sending out ravenous tentacles, a worm writhing in a claw, the victim's stertorous breathing, agony and metamorphosis, the unrelenting rhythms of life and death. The man observed the succession of fields and pinewoods, the blackened roofs, the enclosures in which cattle could be heard lowing softly, and the shale supports erected like tombstones around the small makeshift pens. With the shrewd eye of a peasant, he calculated the value of acres of land, predicting yields and envying the black soil glimpsed through cracks opened up by drought. He belonged to that class of prudent profiteer, always more fortunate than the truly ambitious who suffer rather more on account of their imaginations than they would from mere incompetence or bad luck. He was a man full of middling virtues, someone in whom the balance of all his mediocre faculties might even be perceived as an anomaly. He was a businessman, and, on that roasting afternoon, was travelling from one part of the province to another, riding on that buzzing machine, whose chrome flashed like a bright comet set alight by the burning air itself. Perhaps because he had always travelled on foot in this region, and always taken the back ways, he didn't recognise the road, and proceeded slowly and cautiously, feeling somewhat proud of his new status as a traveller – a role which, even he would admit, offered more in terms of respectability than comfort. But he was a former country-dweller himself and had only recently become civilised, acquiring as a sign of his prosperity a newspaper subscription and a watch that was fastened to his wrist with a strap made of silver mesh. Others – the ones approaching the pinnacle of progress – had already sensed that extreme comfort might well be in inverse ratio to respectability.

The man, who, as we mentioned, was slightly disoriented, was doing arithmetic with the landscape, pondering profits and costs, filling vats and wine-presses to the brim, loading granaries with grain and the local storehouses with timber. 'Good bit of business', he said, in a trance of speculative inspiration. His motorbike, with its bee-like abdomen, seemed to hover delicately, dividing the ground into two fine walls of white sand. 'Damn,' thought the man. 'Where the hell am I?' There was no breeze, or even a hint of cooling shade. The ground itself

seemed to be panting hard, as if about to breathe its last; the whitewash on the boundary markers was flaking, and crows flew over the crops in the fields, the shaggy feathers on their necks like grubby ruffs. From the distant tops of eucalyptuses came their anxious, piercing cawing.

Using his hand as a visor, the man was looking around him. He smiled, his expression suddenly brightening, greatly relieved now that he realised where he was. He dismounted, and headed off up a track squeezed between two banks cut out of the soft, crumbling clay, and lined with heather and gorse. Nearby was the general store belonging to Bento, a wily colleague who often tipped him off about hardware deals, was always very clued up about commissions and profit-making schemes requiring no capital outlay, and kept up to date on all the latest rumours and gossip. Otherwise, he was a fat man, shabbily-dressed under his sackcloth apron, his patched shirtsleeves covered in wine-stains, and a thicket of hair plugging each ear. He was regularly deceived by his wife, a quick-witted woman, whose tremulous flesh was much prized by his clientele. These were the thoughts of our man with the motorbike as he puffed his way wearily up the sloping track.

The shop was located in a clearing, a modest retreat sheltered by a vine trellis, whose ancient, knotty branches hung limp as lianas. There was a table outside, with a bench placed beneath the red post box on the wall. The counter and the spirals of fly-paper could be seen through the doorway, where a sprig of laurel hung. The man left his bike at the edge of the path, checking it over carefully first.

'Anybody home!' he called in a casual, friendly tone. The woman came out, her skirt rearing up over her taut belly, and greeted him with a cheeky look before she spoke.

'Bento's gone to the market in town,' she said. She had a pretty face that was full of colour; and she was wearing a pair of very unusual gold tassel earrings like little gothic towers studded with turquoises.

'It's you I've come to see, not old Bento!'

'Well! Will you listen to the cheek of the man!' and she laughed, her hands on her hips, affecting contemptuous disbelief. 'I know what *you* want – and that's a drink!'

With a final chuckle, she went inside, and from within came the sounds of glasses clinking down onto the zinc counter, then being noisily rinsed under the tap. Turning to the table beneath the coppery vine leaves, he was somewhat startled to hear a voice beside him – muted, cordial and slightly breathless.

'Good afternoon,' said the stranger. His voice was no different to the hurried, overly friendly tone used by beggars and a certain class of small farmer, whose humility is a result of the pessimism to which they've been reduced by years of subsistence living and by the meanness of the soil and the climate. It's the meanness of the landscape itself that has the most demoralising effect on character.

'Good afternoon,' replied our man with the motorbike. He took a seat across from the stranger, studying him with the shrewd analytical skills that quickly develop in any civilised person as a defence mechanism. The other man looked placidly back at him, with a gaze that was reminiscent of certain philosophical dogs who, given their proletarian condition, always expect the worst, regardless of whether the prospects are good or bad. It was a courteous gaze, even jovial, and lit by a certain inner irony, a feeling with which he seemed otherwise unfamiliar. This other fellow was a complete stranger, but our man had long since shed the primitive nature that sees every stranger as a potential foe. With strangers he felt, instead, an urge to communicate, a desire to share knowledge and information, news from other lands, to discuss the march of progress, the genius of the mechanised man, the joy of commerce, the fabled rhythms of profit, trade, efficiency and success. His sociability knew no bounds, even though, in general, mankind was to him a matter of increasing indifference.

'Just passing through?' he asked. He noticed the other man's threadbare clothes, his habit of

79
80
81
82

nervously turning his glass round and round so as to collect every last drop of wine, and, sensing his ascendancy over his neighbour, he adopted a bluff, good-humoured manner. 'Times are hard for everyone... so don't worry about it,' he said in a voice full of gentle mockery.

The other man laughed softly. He was pale and had grizzled hair; he wore a peculiar jacket made from a thick material like that of an overcoat, with enormous patched-on pockets. A metal clip, long out of fashion, fastened his tie to his shirt.

'An awful lot of things are happening to me far too quickly, and I...' The man seemed about to apologise, and gently shook his head, as if wishing to shake off certain importunate ideas or to detach himself from other painful feelings.

'As far as I'm aware, nothing ever happens too quickly, except death.'

'Well, an awful lot of deaths are happening to me.' He leaned back against the wall, while his frail, tremulous hands continued to turn his glass round and round. 'Only a few days ago I was locked in a cell, and had nothing else to do but measure time, to count time, hours, minutes, infinitesimal fractions of time. 'This is death,' I told myself. No desires, no hopes, no expectations, no plans, only time. Nothing but time, endless time!'

'Were you in prison?' our man with the motorbike asked, leaning forward with an air of sympathetic complicity, shameless in his grotesque curiosity. And so it was, on that scorching afternoon, and as a result of his feverish diligence, his mind crammed with numbers and economic intrigues, his nerves strained to breaking point by the exchange rate, that there came a pause, an interval, something intriguing, voluptuous, and, at the same time, trivial. 'Why were you in prison?' he asked.

'Ideas, intentions, words,' the man said, then fell silent. Then, with that look of lofty irony that must have seemed strange even to himself, he went on: 'I knew death! Ah, when you lose all sense of place along with the ability to coordinate your thoughts! I knew what it was to be dead, that atmosphere of immobility and silence, of absence; I knew what it was to be dead, to be reduced to the most extreme, the most horrendous isolation and solitude, the infinite void. But now...'

Breathless, our man contemplated him with round, astonished eyes, crumpling an oil-stained handkerchief in his hands. He was so enthralled he could not move, could not think, dumb with fear. Who was this man? He had never seen him before in the area, or anywhere else. Or maybe he had, but hadn't noticed him. The world is full of creatures too strange to be noticed.

'Now, though, death, my own material death, seems somehow so close, so easy, of no consequence! It would take no more than a glass of water, accepted at the door of some hovel, to destroy me and send me rolling into a ditch to rot. And yet I know that even were a mountain to collapse on top of me I would not succumb.' He raised his beautiful eyes, which rested on that humble scene: the old vine trellis and the dusty clearing where the paths converged. 'How pleasant it is to have no reason to hope', he said. 'How free I am now!'

'And the ideas?' murmured our man.

'They're still with me, but further off, in a place where man can finally become a unity, can live out his ideas, without the constraint of having to adapt to human nature. The bad thing about good ideas is that they only ever represent the affirmative aspect of man, who is intrinsically dual. This is why beautiful ideas wither or decompose as soon as you try to apply them to life. I used to pursue my ideas, now I live them, but have broken free of the condition that makes man a root that becomes entangled in time and waits. I've had my resurrection. A moment which, in itself, is worth an eternity, in which our footsteps seem as if projected into space, in which movement surprises us, like a new birth at which we ourselves are present. "Now," I said to myself, "I will return to my friends, I will take their hands in mine and tell them I am alive, that they are alive with me." I thought that the secret to communication between men was time, that profound fusion of lives for which all that is needed is shared time. Once dead, each of us becomes individualised in time. I said: "I am alive." And my friends

83
84
85

didn't recognise me, they didn't hear my voice. Time, the abstraction that binds men together, formed a closed circle around me. "I am alive," I say. But where? In what place, in what future or what past? Men are not my neighbours in time, and yet I am alive, I am the resurrection and the ecstasy, and they are merely a hope.'

Our man with the motorbike shuddered. He mopped his brow with his oil-stained handkerchief, a hasty, troubled gesture. He didn't dare look at the stranger's face, and could see only the man's hands, which he kept nervously clasping and unclasping, when not repeatedly turning his glass round and round.

'Who are you?' our man asked. 'Tell me everything.'

'I already have.'

'Everything?' And he was left feeling humbled and slightly annoyed by his own incredulous, almost indignant outburst. Into his mind, made to assimilate progress, came a whirlwind created by the small germ of an idea, formless and unsettling. Anything it occurred to him to say seemed useless and futile, but the silence wounded him. Each passing minute weighed on his heart like an eternity of yesterdays. And the sense of his own reality became so intense that it was as if it filled the entire universe and his lungs were taking in gigantic breaths of the infinite. 'Soon it will all be over,' he heard a muffled voice say. And the masses of sound, as immense as his own presence, grew and were amplified by the desolate expanses of silence. Every instant was a death agony, pointless and definitive. 'I want to be free,' he thought. 'I don't want to witness my own end, savouring every sensation, loving every centimetre of my own skin. I want to vanquish time.' Suddenly, he leaned forward, like a doll toppling over, and sat with his head resting on his folded arms, his eyes open and extraordinarily, intently aware of the little instances of life happening around him – a spider's web trembling in the breeze, a rustle of leaves gilded by the sun, the fleeting shadow of a sparrow. A teardrop fell, moistening his fingers.

'I'm not expecting Bento back until later tonight!'

The woman was smiling a knowing, mischievous smile, wiping her hands on her long blue-striped apron. It was getting late, and the white paths glittered like crushed mica. The cattle hurrying down to drink bruised the surface with the thud of their hooves. 'Evening!' called the young boys returning from the pastures, their bellies stuffed with green grapes, chivvying their herds along with freshly cut canes. A young girl went into the shop, clutching a greasy bottle under one arm.

'Shop!' she cried, while carefully inspecting the contents of that dark place, the measures of paper displayed according to size, the bundles of yarn that hung from nails like scalps. Our man looked around him in numb, melancholy surprise. The place opposite him was empty.

'Look here, that fellow...'

With a gesture, he indicated the place where the stranger had been sitting beneath the red post box, leaning his head back against the flaking whitewash on which numbers had been written in indelible purple. But she was bustling back and forth on her bare feet, attending to customers, full of good-natured, amusing banter, every movement setting the little gold towers of her earrings swinging flirtatiously, seductively. When she finally returned to stand before the table and give her beautiful barmaid's laugh, he asked no more questions.

'Give my regards to Bento,' he said when he left.

'I'll be sure to pass them on!' called the woman, standing in the doorway, one looping branch from the pale vine forming a halo above her hair, which she smoothed languidly, scratching at her head with an ornamental comb edged with imitation gemstones.

On the road, the man stopped, resting one hand on the bike's pale woollen saddle-cover, where his initials were embroidered in red. The old asphalt surface stretched out before him, and, looking at it, he felt a kind of dizziness, a weary yearning. He was thinking about the stranger. And now, recalling the man's solemn, emaciated features, his fine eyes full of a

cheerful irony apparently so at odds with his own nature, he seemed to recognise him. He had a painful recollection of every word the man had spoken, dispassionate and yet imbued with joy, utter joy. Who was he? Who were his friends? Who had turned him away? Who had encountered him but failed to recognise him? Who had forgotten him? Slowly, a doubt took shape in his mind and grew and grew until it completely dominated his thoughts. 'Did I know him too?' he wondered. And suddenly he longed to see the man again, to gaze into his eyes, to steep his soul in that strange yet loyal presence, distant and yet companionable. He wanted to tell him that he had recognised him, that his words had become tangled up inside his mind, but that he knew who he was and remembered him, that he wasn't alone after all, or free, and that, in the bosom of time, they were one will and one intention.

But the stranger had left a while ago. It was almost night; swarms of fireflies moved amongst the broom, filling the air with a soft glow, with slowly drifting flecks of emerald. The man couldn't be far away, given his unsteady pace along the old asphalt road; and he could catch him up, as fast as a comet, and join him on the road. That is what our man with the motorbike decided to do, in the belief that he was flying along on the back of a magic bee, metallic and blue. The frenetic buzzing grew until it drowned out the sound of the wheels and the spraying sand. 'It won't take me long to catch him up,' he thought. He trembled with compassion, recalling the fingers of those hands nervously clasping and unclasping. He shuddered with fear too. He wasn't sure why, but he was overwhelmed by a burning, desperate unease that even his swift, determined pursuit could not assuage.

Our man raced on, in that night full of bright fireflies, their lights flickering from bush to bush. All that could be heard was the buzzing of that blue wasp and the whirring of the tyres, the breathing of the man as he scanned the empty road, with, in his heart, the pain of a premonition – of anguish, of hope. And nothing more, nothing more.

*Translated by Victor Meadowcroft
and Margaret Jull Costa*

Agustina B-L.
in Take Six

26
87

The Conch Shell

He was ill and sleeping only fitfully, but even through his closed eyelids, he was conscious of the red and blue glare from the flashing neon sign as it sent out sudden waves of hot light and cold light. The room was dark, yet the atmosphere seemed impregnated with multiple particles, like an impalpable, grainy surface that simultaneously dissolved and transmitted colour. In the street below, the newspaper sellers had begun crying their wares; from inside, he could sense the nebulous green of the air as night fell. And the nocturnal city, the vaguely bohemian glow of lights, the sound of the passing crowd, came to him like a summons that was, at once, sensual, tantalising and bitter. He was ill and sleeping only fitfully, entirely given over to that relatively peaceful state, which can seem almost sinister or corrupt; a troubled, never-satisfied peace, which is both a creative force and a realisation that while life is all intense, vertiginous growth, it remains eternally unfulfilled. So he lay drowsily awake, one arm bent beneath his head, like a resting shepherd. And then, suddenly, the piano. 'Oh, no, not that tune again!' In his head he could hear the blithe, bouncy, jovial melody of *Tales from the Vienna Woods*. Oh, how he hated it. Each note sounded as if it were sticky and dirty. He could anticipate every grubby, sweaty key, one after the other. He could imagine his mother in the house of blue tiles on the road leading down to the sea. The cold, hermetic room; the open piano, with its hinged bronze candlestick-holders above the keyboard, a much-thumbed selection of waltzes, the pages covered in cryptic annotations, and on the corner shelves, a collection of seashells. And the house itself was like a shell, echoing with distant murmurs, muffled and remote, like the cries of mermaids in the mist, like the roar of the backwash, the low, dragging, rasping sound of waves as they retreat, carrying the sand with them. Yes, the house itself was like one of those salt-smelling conch shells, each containing a small shrivelled creature, dead and shiny and viscous inside its porcelain lair. 'Through Vienna's lovely woods...' And at that hour too... the piano indulging in a minor musical orgy of clumsy, hysterical sounds, a tangle of truncated phrases, of crass improvisations, languid arpeggios and a persistent hammering, bleakly obsessive and tethered to that tonic C. 'Oh, no, not that tune again!' It was four days since he had fallen ill and been left to fester in that bedroom-cum-cellar, the air saturated with cigarette smoke, the lint on his pillow case giving off the putrid smell of damp hay. The old house had once been used as a nightclub, the different floors connected by a vast spiral staircase, each step the shape of a coffin. It had never been renovated and so retained the original mouldings and wooden carvings that framed the empty spaces once filled by mirrors long since removed. A few screens and partitions rose up from the scuffed parquetry like bare canvases. The people who inhabited the house were methodical types, whose daily lives had, over time, acquired certain eccentricities; because real eccentrics are never original – they are simply those whose lack of imagination allows them to make of their habitual life a series of rigid habits. The young man lived there because he was studying, or had managed to get a job, or, more likely, was studying and working at the same time. His mother wrote to him often. She lived in a small village on the coast. She was almost infuriatingly kind, almost abjectly sympathetic, not to mention exasperatingly sensible, and as absurdly domesticated as only a human being, especially a civilised one, can be. She lived a kind of semi-conscious existence, picking out those Viennese waltzes on the piano, giving the melodies a languid, plangent quality. 'Oh, no, not that tune again, not that same tune!' He tried in vain to project his thoughts beyond the tune, like a ball being thrown. Through the lovely Vienna woods... The melody began over and over...

'Excuse me, could you tell me who it is playing the piano in the room above me? There's a

woman who keeps playing *Tales from the Vienna Woods*. She's dead, and her petrified fingers run up and down the keyboard, and the music sounds distant and muffled as if it were being played inside a shell.'

But nobody wanted to tell him who it was. So he decided to go and knock on the door of his upstairs neighbour. She was a little old woman, with bowed legs, who wore a grey, almost Tyrolean-style hat, a hat adorned with a single stiff goose feather, sulphur-yellow in colour.

'I would really appreciate it if you could stop playing! It isn't that you play so very, very badly, but because the music sounds as though it were being filtered through the porcelain walls of a conch shell...'

'What do you want?' asked the woman. Her stern, solemn face, with its flaccid downy jowls, was like the face of a baboon. And, like a baboon endowed with only a few primal instincts, she didn't understand what he was going on about. 'What do you want? Do you have any idea who you're talking to?'

Aware of her own limited understanding, she became rather prickly, alarmed by the manners of this intruder apparently about to invade her cramped room crammed with furniture and lined with old cubist wallpaper. Victor Hugo, in his meditative pose, took pride of place, like a family portrait, alongside tulle curtains trailing grubby fringes, and old Louis XV dolls, their cloth cheeks adorned with painted beauty spots.

'I'm afraid you're very much mistaken if you think...' she began, by way of a prologue, but then said nothing more and, uncertain as to what attitude to adopt, took refuge behind a tetchy frigidity.

'Really?' he said, without looking at her, and continuing his pointless inventory of all the objects in the room, everything, down to the glass blocks beneath the feet of the piano. 'What I meant to say is that hearing that music as if through the walls of a shell – almost as if it were trapped inside the acoustics of a conch shell – is quite simply unbearable. The Vienna woods walled inside a shell. I don't mean forget-me-nots and creamy-white mushrooms or primroses, a superficial impression of pleasant, transitory things, but everything the music itself failed to capture – vast clearings beneath a green vault, thick roots, clouds of dust like flames filled with light and wind, and all trapped inside a conch shell!'

'Huh?' And the woman retreated, still perplexed, feeling her way back into the room, her fingers running lightly over her compendia of Czerny variations for piano and little souvenir boxes stuffed with old stamps, yellow and magenta.

'Yes!' he bellowed, reaching out his arms in an attitude that succeeded in being threatening rather than expressive of a strange, impetuous sincerity, however genuine. 'I mean it. Is there anything more terrifying than the perpetual distant murmur of a barely audible reality coming from inside a shell? Is there anything more disturbing, more terrible?'

He turned suddenly to the piano and hammered at some of the keys with his index finger, as if to check they were in tune. But the poor woman, mad with fear, was now circumnavigating the side tables, the armchairs, the cushions covered in ruffles and frills lying higgledy-piggledy on the floor, and finally managed to edge her way out of the front door, where she uttered a hoarse, quivering howl of terror.

'Help!'

She was left almost perched on the bannister, exactly like a baboon, her cheeks soft with down and a deep, accusatory look in her eyes. The Tyrolean hat still adorned her head, and, despite her deranged state, her terror, she made a point of righting the goose feather, which stood stiff and blunt as a letter opener. The stairwell filled with the sound of trampling feet and voices, a frenzy of outrage. The young man shrugged and went back down the stairs.

'Oh, no, not that tune again, not again!' He was ill and sleeping fitfully in his bedroom-cum-cellar filled with the putrid smell of damp hay. Even through his closed eyelids he was aware of a sense of time and space mediated by abrupt waves of cold light and hot light, the blue and red

of the neon sign. 'The Vienna woods...' The melody came to him, slight and cheerful, almost nasal, interspersed with notes that were either wrong, hesitant or barely there at all. And now it was not just the melody, but a distant murmur, the rolling, rasping sound of waves as they retreat, dragging the sand with them. The characteristic sound of a conch shell, a vague churning, like a musical phrase with only the barest hint of a motif, insistent and insinuating, imperceptible, never fully grasped. He was ill, and now he slept. It was night, and from outside, penetrating the porous walls, came the damp chill of the fog; a mouse crept out from its hole behind a partition and scurried across the floor to gnaw at the edge of an old calendar. Not a sound from the piano; and perhaps there never had been anybody playing *Tales from the Vienna woods*, because the house was as glum as an abandoned beehive, and not a sound either from the school for typists on the floor above, where, at certain times of the day, the relentless battering of keys could be heard out in the street. And yet. Even in the anguished depths of sleep he was aware of the diluted murmur, muffled and yet so real, the murmur you hear the moment you press a shell to your ear. And his inability to understand, his lack of the necessary insight or knowledge to penetrate the truth of that dim, distant suggestion of a sound, made him feel impatient and downhearted, and, ultimately, indignant. He was sleeping, rocking his head back and forth on the pillow, like someone in torment. 'Oh, no, not again, not again!' Inside him, keeping time with his heart and the pulsing of the arteries in his brain, was the sound of the shell; it poured forth of its own accord, rising to a roar that made it no more comprehensible, only more intense, mounting in successive towering waves, until it reached the cold empty spaces above the city and the night, above the dead, immemorial stars, and the multiple suns rising on new worlds.

*Translated by Victor Meadowcroft
and Margaret Jull Costa*

Green Philosophy

On one of those nights when the mist seems to lend even the most sinister backstreets a hint of brightness, of moon-glow, two men were attempting to take shelter from the cold inside a more than usually spacious doorway. Both were dressed in rags, had sparse beards, and were silent. Embracing the vault of their own ribs, they buried their scrawny, raw-knuckled hands in their armpits and in the armholes of their grimy coats – charitable gifts no doubt or else salvaged from a rubbish heap. It would be impossible to state their profession without a smile of astonishment – the smile of a dreaming Falstaff, or of a metaphysical Mephistopheles. These two men, now warming themselves on their own breath, were in a line of work that, by virtue of its illegality, had its continued existence practically assured. To put it simply, they were hunters of sudden deaths. Now we all know about sudden death. An apoplexy – as it is termed by the wealthy classes – when the hero passes from one zone to another, from one ethical extreme to another, and recognises that there was no need to take a step at all, since all extremes meet in death. The nameless deaths of the anonymous never strike us as premature, but merely as inevitable, and do not even arouse the faintest wind of curiosity.

These two nocturnal beings made their living – as macabre as it was absurd – by snatching dead bodies off the city streets, those who had been stopped in their tracks by a pulmonary embolism or by heart failure, those frozen in the gesture of one still yearning for a motherly caress, or prostrated by hunger, clawing at the earth and pressing to it a still hopeful, humble mouth. When the dead man's appearance suggested he was someone from the middle-classes, even if only of modest means, they would steal the corpse that would normally be transported in a carriage from those chance locations to the morgue and deliver it instead to the person's home, where, like dutiful public servants, they would wait patiently for a tip. In the areas where they worked, they had established a rapport with the patrolling officers, essentially good-hearted men who resorted to violence more out of fear than bravado. A degree of comradely sympathy often prompted them to lend their protection to these hunters of sudden deaths. And it was from this same kindly authority – which never questioned their desire to ignore the law – that they obtained the most coveted morsels of information.

'So, officer, nothing tonight?'

'No, nothing.'

They went their separate ways, one party to take shelter in the open mouth of a doorway, near their cart kept hidden in shadows, the other to continue his patrol, his cloak speckled with a fine dew, like silver filings shimmering in the mist.

This, it seemed, was one of those nothing nights. From their strategic position, our two lookouts kept a dejected watch, hopping from leg to leg to keep from going numb, and uttering hollow, half-hearted curses. In that alleyway overhung by old balconies, you could almost hear the silence giving its last stertorous breath, like moans filtered through infinite time, groans emitted by the stones themselves, resigned, exhausted sighs, a pain pacified but unassuaged by an awareness of eternity. One of the men had retreated further into the doorway, searching for a corner in which to curl up and perhaps get some sleep. The other man spoke to him through white lips numb with cold.

'Don't lie down, not unless you want to wind up in the morning papers!'

'Leave me be,' murmured the man, sitting hunched and huddled, his face sunk on his chest, between the thin lapels of his coat. He said nothing more and became quite still, struggling to conserve his bodily warmth and avoiding all movement, which sent needles of pain piercing his skin, as slack and worn as a much-used rag. From the end of the street, hemmed in by darkness,

93
94

came the whistle, tenuous but distinct, of the police patrol.

'Come on, we're in business,' said the one still standing, hopping about and shaking himself like someone who has just suffered a burn. 'Come on,' he said again. He stepped out onto the pavement; his espadrilles stuck to the damp flagstones, and he shivered in the surrounding mist, a grey-green silhouette, slightly silvered around the edges.

'There's a fellow over there,' explained the officer. 'He's as stiff as a kipper. Lord knows how you're going to deal with him. Looks as if he's been dead since the world began, and might well stay that way till it ends.'

'Some blood does coagulate very fast,' said the hunter of sudden deaths in a grave, confiding tone. Noticing that his partner had not accompanied them, he hurled a few curses back at him, but so mildly and unconvincingly that they had little effect.

'Ah, there's the body. And none too soon either...'

He crouched down next to the body and turned it over. The policeman's lantern illuminated a set of rigid features, one temple dented by a fall; a viscous liquid trickled from the nostrils, and the closed mouth bore an almost mystical smile. The face seemed to belong to that category of clerk whose originality resides, like a hot brand on their pasty complexions, in their defeated expression and the terrible emptiness of their gaze, as though, despite having lost all hope, they still harboured certain desires. Beneath the cuffs of his threadbare overcoat, the man still had on his black serge sleeve-garters, which, the elastic gone, hung loose about his wrists. Maybe he was returning from working overtime doing the accounts or drawing up invoices, as a desperate solution to his pressing needs, to the ever-dangling threat of poverty, even more exhausting than the struggle, in open battle, with poverty itself. On his middle finger, there was a purple ink-tinged callous where his pen had rested. But his nails were long, neat and polished, like those of a guitarist; they were tapered, like talons, meticulously filed at the edges, and tended with an innocent extravagance that is sometimes a sign of mania, a kind of idle luxury in a life suffocated by anxiety, fear or sheer mediocrity. How many strange, complex things did those claw-like nails betray, nails breathed on, polished on a sleeve or a flannel trouser leg, or pared with a blade or penknife and held up at arm's length to be approvingly or critically appraised. What deep marvels of bold, burning aspiration did they provoke in the man whose steps, whose words, whose daily routines were so trivial and monotonous, a continuum of empty things and empty thoughts.

The policeman withdrew slightly; the snap of the lantern being extinguished sounded like the single light rap of a fine copper doorknocker.

'Go and fetch your mate, and get a move on,' he said grumpily, handing over the dead man's business card, which he had removed from his wallet. 'You're in luck. Sometimes there's no way of identifying them.'

Once again, the hunter of sudden deaths looked around, searching for his companion, muttering curses and threats, hopping up and down like an excited orangutan. Finally, he hurried back to the street and the doorway where they had been keeping watch, and there he stumbled over the curled-up hulk of his friend, apparently asleep, his chin wedged between his knees. He shook the hulk rather roughly and called him by his name in a gruff, fraternal voice. The other man, however, was dead, with not a breath of life, energy or warmth left in his corpse, which lay rolled up like a ball of thread, unconscious, unfeeling. His eyelids were closed, and, yes, he was asleep, with a puzzled frown creasing his brow, a line that had been there so long, from childhood even, that it would still be there, a faint line, even when he wasn't frowning. He was sleeping, no longer blind, now that his eyes had glazed over and were as cold as marbles, and tinged, like marbles, with the same vague, misty colours. His hair was all that protected the back of his neck, which, meekly bent, seemed to be offering itself to the butcher's blade; his hands were clasped, clutching at nothing; his heart was still now, and he slept. Like the mould that grows on decaying things in ditches, and takes its shape from them,

he provoked no feelings of revulsion or even distaste. Yet if, beneath that matter, that fungal colour, we were to see a human skin, then our hearts would contract in astonishment – astonishment, incredulity, surprise, but nothing more. There's no pain to apportion, no pity to feel. Only shock, shame, a desire to revert to that destiny which makes us all brothers in hell and in the grave, given that the light is so scarce, and chance is nothing but an affront which, in sparing us, shames us.

The hunter of sudden deaths stood beside his companion, thinking. He knew the man's 'other half', a creature as withered as a tree that has never blossomed. To say that she felt love for that man would be to give new meaning to the word 'love' – for the devotion of a stricken beast, despite all the usual female treacheries, still looks for hope, for fortune, in the cesspit of even the most rotten and arid existence, and all of that is both a state of love and hatred, the very root of life, a fatal unity and duality. She would receive him with the piercing howls that issue forth more from the nerves than from the heart, then she would weep for him, kissing him with the kind of doting affection that makes us turn away in disgust, for we tolerate such feelings only in the young, in those who are beautiful and carry the splendid mark of vitality in their sparkling gaze, in the open fire of their senses.

'But what about the other body?' thought the man. And this is where the dilemma became insoluble. Dragging his friend to the squalid room in which the damp flowed down the walls like lava, and where he would be greeted by that terrible woman, who would heap him with insults and accusations, would mean losing the other corpse, whose return home would pay him his wages for that night, and perhaps for several more. Twice he made to leave the body in the shelter of the doorway, only to stop, hesitate and return. The body was no more than a pile of rags, but somehow it was as present as if a living sense were speaking in whispers, communicating laws and rules. 'There's that other man too...' he thought. And he could see a door being opened, hear a halting, sleepy voice, alarmed at the unexpected ringing of the bell; then the tremulous exclamations, the switching on of lights, the dragging footsteps on the hall carpet, the echoes of smothered, stifled sobs; and, finally, the grateful handshake and the slow closing of the door, like someone retreating and separating off two worlds, two fragments of life.

With a groan of resignation and a sense of rancour towards himself and the cruel tyrant who had defeated him, he lifted up his dead companion, lay him on the cart, and started out. They were swallowed up by the mouth of the alleyway, which opened onto further stretches of still more sordid, solitary arteries. From a distance, in the green glow of the mist, he looked like a root exiled by the earth and left lying on the surface, knotted and withered, yet with small bursts of vital sap creating unexpected miracles of life, like the ancient olive trees on the island of Majorca, wasted by time, wizened and splay-armed like impotent ghosts caught in a pose of static agony, an agony that the very apprehension of eternity soothes but does not diminish; he was like one of those dead trees from whose extinct branches there one day emerges a small febrile green shoot. And the generosity of the man moving off with his cart, from which hung the dead man's lifeless limbs, was like the green philosophy of a tender green leaf, enchanting and bright. Indeed, perhaps his whole history was contained in the green philosophy of that night.

*Translated by Victor Meadowcroft
and Margaret Jull Costa*

97
98
99

The Procession

'When will it come?' he asked himself. He kept lifting the edge of the curtain and peering out, but to no avail. The panes of glass, spattered with the corpses of little flies from the stables were dull, as if porous and penetrated by tiny bubbles of air. And the lane was far from the centre of town, isolated, dusty, bordered by wasteland where the only growing things were desiccated shrubs like spiky miniature fir trees; the ditches overflowed with myriads of wild flowers, brilliantly coloured and yet barely visible. 'When will it come, when will the procession arrive?' he wondered. He had been there since daybreak, watching for the procession that would emerge from the outskirts of the city, pennants shimmering and fluttering, filling the horizon with unexpected, pulsating colours. The day dragged on, the shadows shifted position; sheep dogs circled the fields, watching their flocks. The lane was deserted, its old, crumbling walls held together only by the claws of the ivy and the clumps of brambles. 'When will the procession arrive, when?' He rests his weary head on the windowsill for a moment, and falls asleep. Not for long, not for many hours. When he again lifts the edge of the curtain and looks out of the window at the desolate lane disappearing off into the distance between the desiccated shrubs and the barely visible yet brilliantly coloured flowers, he feels perplexed and uneasy and asks himself: 'Could the procession have gone by already? But when?' He opens the window, and the panes of glass, held in place by nothing but dried-out putty, fall to the ground, landing silently in the dust. The earth outside looks all scuffed up, and a trail of footprints seems to undulate and interweave, before, finally, vanishing, swept away by the swirling dust. When he takes a breath, he can feel on his tongue the rough, absurd taste of that dust. Then he closes the window and, behind the empty frame, continues to wait.

*Translated by Victor Meadowcroft
and Margaret Jull Costa*

99
101

Mushroom Weather

A weak south-southwesterly wind; overcast skies. Mushroom weather. Organic matter covers walls and ditches – black mould, sludge, fungi, stubborn lives possessed of a vegetable vitality, growing wherever there is decay and ruin, in the doleful folds of the earth, in putrid crannies, in stagnant puddles edged with mud. Like mushrooms, men appear to sprout up from the street, ooze out of the stones, grey and ochre and verdigris, their faces empty, their hands like roots heavy with water.

L was walking slowly through the Baixa, heading towards the river. An unsettling day, seemingly disconnected from the passage of time; an atmosphere similar to certain formless dreams that leave the mind weary, the memory swept clean; teasing little flurries swirling here and there around dwindling pinnacles of sand. The statue of Dom José with its sad, leprous hue; launches and barges bobbing on the high tide; the soft splash of waves lapping against the quay. The whole mood of that afternoon, imbued with a malignant, creeping expectancy, an unnerving stillness, an unrelenting sameness, was somehow seeping into L's being. He was a young man, still a student, the sort of person you might describe as original, that is, someone destined to crystallise into vacuous elegance, at the expense of his own personality. He had been wandering about aimlessly all day, beset by tedium, in that frame of mind which seems to reduce all creatures to the same condition as unthinking organic matter with only vegetable instincts. Not that he hadn't put up some resistance – for it was resistance to that exhaustion of the mind and the senses that had prompted L – on that dull, oppressive, and yet extraordinarily fluid afternoon – to seek out the kind of disquiet that might rouse him from that state.

The bank of the river was slippery, viscous, and the whole watery expanse seemed to swell and pulse with the pressure of the waves, green and leaden, giving off a smell of fermentation and corruption, the tenuous, subtle smell of the sea. Without thinking about it, almost as if he were taking part in a kind of somnambular ritual, L set out for the other shore. But the other shore was equally glum and lifeless. The picturesque, the thrilling and the fascinating had joined hands and eloped, along with their procession of emotions, all garlanded with daisies. O winds, unleash your powers and roar above the elms, the chimneys, the river! Fill the silence of this dull, sultry afternoon. Leaves, spread yourselves like auburn wings! Topple the clouds like pillars of plaster, send forth vast fiery flowers to illuminate the river bank. Stand the waves up like riders, with foam for bridles; make the willows bend beneath the howling gale, vibrating like lyres. And may the Nymphs of the Tagus sob and shake their green locks, as they slip through the cold cloister of the waters, lamenting their dead poets...

He decided to go back. It wasn't a particularly busy time, and the grubby little ticket booth, with its bars of flaking paint, seemed very much abandoned.

'A single, please,' said L, placing the coin on the counter. He waited, taking in his surroundings as if from a distance, completely lost in thought. When he turned back to the booth, the coin was gone.

'Where's your money?' insisted a voice from inside.

'I've already paid. I put the money right there.'

'No, you didn't!'

The voice coming from inside the booth had a blunt, unwavering tone, vaguely conciliatory. All that could be seen was a gnarled pair of hands, with swollen veins and black-rimmed nails. Of the coin placed on the counter – not a trace. The rotten thief! L rooted angrily about in his pocket and paid again, filled with a mixture of resentment and embarrassment. But the incident had ruffled him. 'The thief! The cheat!' he kept muttering to himself on the return journey. He'd

been robbed, but even worse was the memory of that sour, peremptory, almost sneering voice. He'd been deceived, like some fool, some dimwit ignorant of the wiles of pickpockets! As if he were a mere nobody. One of those individuals bruised by life, with no fight, no drive, ready simply to surrender to bad luck, failure, even ruin. The thief! The cheat! Such a thing had never happened to him before. Then again, the man hadn't dared to face him. Hadn't met his deep, analytical gaze, hadn't even seen the cut of his jaw, the line of his lips – the restless lips of a young David, persuasive, always ready with the inspired word. He hadn't even experienced his discreetly ironic turn of phrase, his robust response. No, there had been only that anonymous contact, that predatory gesture. The despicable, uncivilised crook; what mean trickery; what shallow opportunism. Cruel fate, wicked sprites let loose on the stagnant air; foul stench; heavy skies, seagulls grazing the water with trembling pointed wings. The rocking stern, the prow raised majestically above the waves. And that voice, cold, indifferent, even slightly mocking. He should have stood his ground, protested, made a real scene with fists and recriminations, a few spat-out teeth. Now that would have been grotesque. Grotesque.

With an irritated flick, L sent the ticket he'd been crumpling between his fingers into the river. The boat was just drawing up alongside the quay.

'Tickets, please!' said the inspector as the passengers disembarked. L managed to stammer:

'But... I... I threw mine away...'

'Did you now? So it's a free ride, is it?' said the man, with a knowing smirk. 'Well, do me a favour – go over there and buy yourself a ticket, all right?'

Mushroom weather. A weak south-southwesterly wind, overcast skies. Surrendering to the inevitability of that afternoon propitious only to organic and vegetable states, to mould and fungi, L – unresisting, resigned and mute – made his way over to the ticket office...

*Translated by Victor Meadowcroft
and Margaret Jull Costa*

Introduction To "Take Six"

This anthology is a double celebration, firstly, of six brilliant Portuguese women writers and, secondly, of the short story form, at which they all excel. Relatively few books are translated into English – the famous three per cent of all books published – and even fewer of those are books written by women. Still fewer are collections of short stories, which most publishers steer well clear of, claiming that readers want novels. What these writers all embrace and embody is the concise perfection of the short story, which is the closest thing we still have to oral culture: a tale that can be told in a matter of minutes and one that, at its best, encapsulates a whole life in a few pages.

The six authors in this anthology represent some of Portugal's finest writers from this century and the last. They also happen to be six of my favourite authors. Some have been translated before, others have not. It is therefore, a great pleasure, to introduce those who have not to an English-reading public.

While these six writers are all very different, there are connecting threads. All have a keen sense of political injustice and repression. 'The Silence' by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen reveals how political oppression (in this case Salazar's regime) soils the whole of society and our own personal peace. Maria Judite de Carvalho's story, 'So Many People, Mariana', paints an ironic portrait of bourgeois Lisbon life and of a society poisoned by the hypocrisy of the fascist government of the time. Agustina Bessa-Luis's 'Green Philosophy' is, among other things, a searing depiction of abject poverty. 'The Familiar Stranger' and 'The Road to Emmaus' are oblique revisitings of Bible stories, both seamed with a subtle criticism of our own self-absorbed age.

Another preoccupation is, inevitably, the position of women in society. Maria Judite Carvalho shows us the gradual isolation of a woman who fails to conform to what society expects of women. Teolinda Gersão shows us women in all kinds of situations and at different ages. Hélia Correia, meanwhile, describes women in a way which is both familiar and bizarre, often with the fates or the furies in attendance, but her female characters are always circumscribed by society's expectations.

The writing is never heavily moralistic or ploddingly realistic. All of the authors have an awareness of the comic element present in any human tragedy, and many of the stories take wing into the realms of fantasy. Agustina Bessa-Luis's stories have a fantastical, almost delirious tone, often heading off into very strange territory indeed; Teolinda Gersão's stories have an infallible nose for the fantastical elements present in everyday lives; and Lídia Jorge brilliantly recreates a child's naturally hyperreal view of the world, in which adults are too absorbed in their own lives to notice a small child's anguish.

Obsession is another connecting thread. The protagonist of 'The Bird Hypothesis' is irrationally obsessed with proving a theory put forward by Borges in one of his stories. The woman in 'The Red Fox Fur Coat' can think of nothing but that eponymous coat. The father in 'The Age of Splendour' can think only of his Latin and his rhinitis, while his little girl is obsessed with the precious gift she has made for him. The favourite uncle in 'The Instrumentalina' thinks only of his bicycle; while the ailing young man in 'The Conch Shell' is being driven mad by a particular tune being tunelessly picked out on the piano upstairs.

Most importantly of all, every one of the stories is, in my view, a real original, a perfect gem of a short story.

Margaret Jull Costa